

ANALYZING A PHOTOGRAPH

A How-To Guide

I. Importance of knowing these principles for future work in film/video/TV and in writing criticism

A. A strong geometrical shape is the key to good composition in graphic design and film and photo composition.

B. For course work, for critical writing, and for professional work in the media -- learn a vocabulary to apply to visual analysis.

Learn...

1...the language of sensory descriptions. Talk and write about an image using the most concrete sensory vocabulary. If you say "tree," talk about how the leaves and branches move, sound, feel and are shaped. What makes this tree different from others. Move from a level of generality to greater and greater specificity in the language you use.

2...the language describing processes of perception. Talk and write about your own stages in looking at and interpreting the picture. What caught your eye; what stood out emphatically; what took a while to notice; how did your eye move around the picture; did it keep coming back to a certain spot?

3...the language for describing the relation between visual and audio elements and their emotional effect. Discuss how a picture conveys tranquillity, dynamism, respect, abjectness? Does it give you a new appreciation of previously overlooked aspects of daily life? Does it reflect a fascination with human art or nature's art? Does it capture a fleeting moment and freeze it for the viewer? Does it make a social comment or a comment on convention?

II. Analyze two-dimensionality and how it gives the effect of depth. Discuss...

A. foreground and background

B. use of the frame

C. perspective and use of perspective

III. Balance can be symmetrical or asymmetrical. Look at the use of...

A. Positive and negative space. An visual interest in negative space and its composition is a major principle of Japanese painting and photography.

B. Figure-ground relations. How does the artist compose the background as well as the major figures?

C. The rule of thirds = Place the horizon line one third or two thirds of the way down, not in the center. Place the most important objects one third or two thirds of the way across the image. Asymmetrical balance, achieved by the rule of thirds, contributes to variety and sharpening.

D. OR use classical balance = a centered subject. There is little dynamism in this compositions and it is used in ads that are supposed to appeal to the very rich, often seen in magazines like the NEW YORKER.

IV. Describe the lines. Find the single visual force that is the strongest. There are actual and implied lines. Is there implied directional movement (even a blur)? How do we read it, left to right, up to down? Analyze strongest parts of frame by quadrant.

A. Horizontals -- Does or should the artist use the rule of threes in composition? Describe emotions elicited. Discuss placement of the horizon line in the frame.

B. Verticals -- Describe the emotions elicited, which are often kinetic, urban, aspirational or authoritative

C. Diagonals give a sense of motion, inconclusiveness, or instability.

D. Shape = design element formed when lines close back on themselves. Commonly square, circle, triangle [often = family, holy family].

E. 3-d shapes = masses, which can only be distinguished from shapes by use of light and shadow.

V. Talk about how the lines and shapes lead the eye. Is there a point where the eye returns or temporarily rests? That is the point of emphasis, and good pictures achieve visual emphasis. Is there an emotion or narrative implied by that visual emphasis?

A. Emphasis = resting place for the eye. Eye returns there. Emphasis creates a center of interest.

1. Human form is most interesting thing in image.

2. Intricacy vs. simplicity. An intricate shape is sharpened when there is also something very simple alongside it; an extreme close-up may show the great intricacy of the texture of the most common objects [for examples, a close-up of all the colors in an oil slick glinting in the sunlight.]

3. Most textured area commands the most attention.

4. The foreground and the right, lower quadrant have more emphasis. The person in front always gets more attention than the person in back.

5. Emphasis comes from implied motion in the image. There are two kinds of eye motion.

a. One is around a geometric shape or back and forth along a line = graphic vector.

b. One is eye motion led by a figure in the content of the image that is going or pointing in a certain direction: examples are a car going in a certain direction, a person walking or picking up a forkful of food, or a glance in a certain direction = motion vector.

6. Humor, the spectacular, the unusual gain our attention. You need other graphic qualities besides these aspects, however, to make a good image.

VI. Texture = visual equivalent to sense of touch. Note kinds of words used to name texture. Texture calls up emotions more primitive than sight.

A. Note how lines together can become a texture with shadowing, grouping.

B. The photo may emphasize the 2-D surface. It may play with printed text or reflections of light or use unusual inserted material to do so.

VII. Contrast creates "sharpening" = more a rapid readability of the image.

A. Contrast of scale -- Without this, more time is spent on mentally establishing the gestalt or creating closure, figuring out what the image is. Gestalt psychology assumes that viewers seek to create closure out of the available elements.

B. Contrast of shape

C. Contrast of color

D. Contrast of texture

E. Contrast of tone

Note contrast range in both natural light and light in photography, film, television -- Low contrast, for example, on a gray day, may be related to a longer time in establishing closure in black and white pictures; it actually creates more saturated colors for color photography and video. Film captures a much higher contrast range than television or video, where the dark areas can easily become all black or the whites lose detail and "bloom."

VIII. Unity -- Line, shape, and texture create a unity in which the whole is greater than sum of its parts; repetition and parallelism are key to establishing unity. In any

photographic analysis it is important to analyze the repetition of shapes and tones in the image.

A. Rhythm = repetition with alternation or repetition with progression. If you just had repetition of elements, it would get boring. An example of progression is a move from large to small versions of a shape; an example of alternation is a shift from light to dark and back again.

B. Motif = a repeated image or sound which reinforces a theme in the work as a whole, perhaps functioning as a symbolic element [e.g., the color red or romantic violins].

C. Redundancy = reinforcing an emotional effect or visual impact in a number of ways within an image or a film as a whole.

D. The image needs a tension between its unity and the kinds of surprises or tensions it contains.

IX. The concepts for this outline are drawn from the following three books:

A PRIMER OF VISUAL LITERACY. Dondis, Donis A. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973).

A GUIDE TO PHOTOGRAPHIC DESIGN. William W. DuBois, Barbara J. Hodik. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983).

SIGHT, SOUND, MOTION: APPLIED MEDIA AESTHETICS. Zettl, Herbert. (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1973).